

Myths and Realities about Bilingual Speakers in the U.S.

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Introduction

While there exist many myths regarding bilingual speakers, we have selected six common ones. Throughout this presentation, we will expose the realities, or truths, of the myths, as well as predict possible origins and reasons for their existence. We have focused on bilingual English and Spanish speakers; however, the majority of these myths hold true for bilinguals of other languages, as well – especially those existing in situations of diglossia.

Myth:
“Learning two languages will lower a child’s proficiency in both languages due to confusion.”

Reality:
A child learning two languages at once will be able to achieve grammatical competence in both languages. The speaker’s language proficiencies will not differ from those of the respective monolingual’s (Cenoz 2001). Regarding rate of language development, Hoff (2009) states that bilingual children are most likely not out of the normal range of variation. Grosjean (2010) maintains that while bilinguals might develop in a different manner linguistically, all of the necessary milestones will still be reached. Newborns that have been exposed to languages that are prosodically-different are able to distinguish between them; and, at four months, can distinguish between languages that are prosodically-similar (Bosch & Sebastián-Gallés 2001), showing that they are not confused.

Myth:
“Real bilinguals never mix their languages. Those who do are confused *semi-linguals*.”

Reality:
There are bilinguals who “mix their languages,” or code-switch, and others who do not (Grosjean 1982). Code-switching actually follows strict grammatical rules, and, contrary to this myth, its execution demonstrates a speaker’s *high proficiency* in both languages (Zentella 1997). Additionally, language choice and switching is not arbitrary, and, although speakers do it unconsciously, they still know when to switch and with whom (Zentella 1997).

Origins of the Myth:
Weinreich (1953) defines an “ideal bilingual” as someone who switches appropriately to “changes in the speech situation, but not in an unchanged speech situation, and certainly not within a single sentence.” In other words, he believed that an ideal bilingual would be someone who maintained one code and register with a given interlocutor in an unchanged situation.

Myth:
“A child should learn one language properly first; then you can start teaching the other.”

Reality:
A child is capable of learning more than one language at once (Montrul 2008) without significant delay in their linguistic development (Döpke, 1997). Time is actually described as having the most effect on a child’s language proficiency; Singleton (1995) affirms that the earlier a child is exposed to a language, the better, so waiting for a child to learn one language before ‘teaching’ him or her another could put the child at a disadvantage. Finally, contrary to popular belief, parents don’t *teach* their children how to speak. Children acquire language (Montrul 2008; Pinker 1994).

Myth:
“Bilingual speakers are rare, globally.”

Reality:
Bilingualism is present in practically every country in the world, in all classes of society, and in all age groups. **In fact, it is difficult to find a society that is genuinely monolingual** (Grosjean 1982). As Lewis (1976) states, “bilingualism has been and is nearer to the normal situation than most people are willing to believe.”

Origins of the Myth:
The reality is that the U.S. is a primarily monolingual country in which 80% of its population only speak English (U.S. Census 2010). The domestic reality of language could be generalized to be a global reality.

Myth:
“Bilinguals have to translate from their stronger to their weaker language.”

Reality:
Bilingual speakers don’t necessarily have an *overall* stronger language. Grosjean (2010) states that bilinguals tend to use certain languages in distinct domains of their lives (the complementarity principle). Also, according to Pinker (1995), we don’t think in words, but rather in concepts (“Mentalese”). We then attempt to express those concepts using words. Thus, a bilingual does not translate between languages because, according to Pinker, he or she is not thinking in a particular language. Further evidence against this myth is provided by Grosjean (2000) who claims that “bilinguals can translate [certain] things from one language to another,” but that they often have difficulties with specialized domains. Additionally, many concepts such as idioms do not have translation equivalents.

Origins of the Myth:
It is possible that this myth was born out of the fact that many bilingual children tend to translate for their parents or caregivers. This myth also could have arisen from the late second language learners who do experience a need to translate from their stronger to their weaker language.

Myth:
“There is no real benefit in raising a child bilingual in the U.S. because English is more important.”

Reality:
Language could be seen as a way of interacting with other cultures and peoples. Grosjean (1982) says “many bilinguals are aware that in some sense or other bilinguals are also bicultural and that biculturalism or its lack has affect on their lives”. Bilingualism is a link between an individual and those peoples who speak his or her languages, which many times is a link to that person’s heritage. Padilla and Long (1982) agree, for instance, that “Spanish-American children and adolescents can learn English better and adjust more comfortably to America if their language and cultural ties with the Spanish-speaking world are kept alive and active from infancy.”

Consequences

These myths and their realities have implications for bilinguals for the reason that they could instigate feelings of incompetence and misunderstanding of their linguistic skills. Additionally, they have implications for caregivers who do not speak the majority language and will raise children who will also inadvertently receive input in a language other than the majority language, which may result in bilingual development (Hoff 2009). The caregivers must take on the responsibility to develop, or at least acknowledge these skills. Throughout the early years, many of these assumptions will be made about bilingual speakers, and that may have a negative effect on their development. Ultimately, It is important to educate implicated parties about the realities of bilingualism so that they can be beneficial and not detrimental to the language development and the overall success of bilingual speakers.

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